

## POINTS OF DEPARTURE

### Caring in the Ivory Tower

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In this paper I argue that the teacher educators who deliberately create and nurture caring teacher–student relationships, despite the many challenges, benefit both themselves and their students in several ways. Although the notion that teachers should care for their students is not new, it may well be that professors too seldom *communicate* their caring clearly to students. First, I outline the literature on caring in education and provide examples of how professors show they care – and why students find this so important. Building on my belief that all (good) teaching involves humans in relation, I then describe how I use beginning-of-the-semester, one-to-one meetings with new students as one example of how caring can be operationalized. In an era when content-matter dissemination and accountability are increasingly reified, it is crucially important to see and treat our students as whole people rather than consumer-critics so that the dominant reductionist and consumerist traditions can be challenged and ultimately transformed.

**Keywords:** caring; modeling pedagogy

All we can do is speak with others as passionately and eloquently as we can; all we can do it to look into each other's eyes and urge each other on to new beginnings. Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each one stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility. (Greene 1995, 43)

### Introduction

Maxine Greene, a pre-eminent US philosopher of education, presents us with a tall task. Can we do as she suggests in full-to-bursting classrooms of students-as-consumers? Is it possible to construct college classrooms that are nurturing, thoughtful, and just in the face of curricular mandates, limited hours, never-ending committee work, and institutional demands to publish and write grants? Do our classrooms address – dialogically or otherwise – what it means to be human? Are our students engaged, passionate, and articulate? How do we stir our students to wide-awakeness, imaginative action, and a passion for possibility? Perhaps greater

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attention to establishing and maintaining caring relationships with students can help us answer some of these questions.

To begin: I see teaching as art as much as craft, and believe that the affective and cognitive domains of learning are interconnected in ways we've yet come to fully understand. I believe students at all levels of education are, and hence must be seen and treated as whole, embodied people who deserve our best 'teacherly' selves so that they are able to maximize their potential. Being my best self means that I must attend to what it means to be alive today, and be ever aware that there is always more to be discovered, more to be said. It also means caring about who my students are, what they are thinking about, what they want to say, and what they want to do.

I've always thought of myself as a caring professor. And students often comment on my availability, openness, and kindness, if not always caring *per se*. But how often do I really get to know my students? In a larger class, can I ever *really* get to know them? And if I don't really know them, can I really care? Is it even possible to be in a caring relationship given the power differential between us? And what happens when my assessment of a student's knowledge, skills, or dispositions threatens our relationship?

I suggest the common denominator in a response to these questions involves deliberately creating and nurturing a caring teacher-student relationship. Building on my belief that all (good) teaching involves humans in relation, I will provide one example of how caring might be operationalized that I have begun to use with some success. The narrative that follows is based on my work as a teacher educator, but I believe the primary premises apply to all who teach in higher education.<sup>1</sup>

### **Caring in education**

Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1996) write that all of us in post-secondary education like to think of ourselves as caring, and this is no doubt true – even if it is just to improve our teacher-evaluation scores (Thayer-Bacon, Arnold, and Stoots 1998). They further contend that professors (actually, teachers at any level of instruction) who care about their students are remembered, effect change, stimulate growth, and are more likely to be successful at teaching their students. In sum, they maintain that caring is *central* to any model of teaching that tries to take into account the student as a whole person.

Noddings (1992) provides a relational framework for thinking about caring in education. This relational quality of caring supposes that caring is not just an individual personality trait of the one-caring (in this case, the teacher), but that the one-caring is in direct relation to another who receives the caring, the one cared-for (the student). Goldstein (2002) extends Noddings' framework by specifically addressing caring in teacher education. Her model emphasizes the contributions to be made to the process of teacher preparation by enhanced interpersonal commitment; being part of a community of learners; and having a passion for the creative, intellectual aspects of teaching. This model aligns with Sternberg's (1988) three components of love – commitment, intimacy, and passion – which are the essential features of her care-centered teacher education. Goldstein further argues that for teacher educators to develop these orientations in their students, they must model desired attitudes and behaviors.

Similarly, in *Teaching, Learning, and Loving* (Liston and Garrison 2004), several authors argue that if we are to make relationship central to our teaching, educators must care about their students' lives and stories. Teacher educators who create true learning communities model intimacy, open communication, and deep reflection, and refuse the language of monetary exchange that sees students as merely 'economic units.' In a similar model from Finland, Heikkinen et al. (2004) suggest that if we are to realize a balance between the cognitive-rational, ethical-political, and affective-personal elements of teaching and learning, we need teacher education curricula that provide space to work, communicate, and think, as well as space to care and love.

These models may be especially important when working with students who find schooling a challenge. Jacobsen, Eggen, and Kauchak (2006) note that when 'bright spots' appear for students who struggle with school, they are usually the result of teachers who care about their students as people and learners. In fact, they contend that it is virtually impossible to succeed in *any* part of teaching without genuinely caring about students and their learning. Although Jacobsen, Eggen, and Kauchak (2006) are referring to compulsory education, I believe these same factors are at play in higher education.

How, then, can we teach in a way that builds and sustains community? How can we make our classrooms places that are life-sustaining and mind-expanding, places of mutual liberation where teacher and students work together in partnership (Hooks 2003)? How do we create vibrant, interesting, and supportive learning spaces? How can we best show students we care about them and their education?

Research suggests that teachers who convey genuine interest in students' success cultivate more productive learners, but there are many ways for professors to show that they care about their students (Kohn 1999; Thayer-Bacon, Arnold, and Stoots 1998). In one example, at Brigham Young University's (BYU) Center for Teaching and Learning,<sup>2</sup> faculty members were asked, 'How do you show students that you know who they are and that you care about their success?' The researchers posed a complementary question to BYU students: 'What makes you feel that a professor knows who you are and is committed to your academic growth?' Interestingly, students' responses largely aligned with professors,' and faculty members' responses were similar to those noted by Thayer-Bacon, Arnold, and Stoots (1998). Both professors and students believe caring and being cared for are important, then, but show and understand caring in different ways.

### **One-to-one initial meetings**

As I alluded to earlier, I believe my students know I care about them and their academic growth. I strive to be readily available, I take my advising responsibilities seriously, and I always try to provide helpful feedback to promote learning. My courses also develop, in part, in response to students' ideas. I am clear in my expectations; I hope I am kind to my students; and I use jokes, attentive listening, and information-gathering about each student to build rapport. I try to show that I care for and support each student, but I also question, challenge, push, and otherwise encourage them, believing that caring means wanting them to be and do their best – for themselves and for the profession.

Furthermore, for teacher educators our teaching also serves as a demonstration of sorts for our students (Goldstein 2002), pre- and in-service teachers, so I try to model practices I think worthy. For example, I believe my work should support the development of teachers who are caring and competent, loving . . . and perhaps even lovable (Noddings 1992), so I do my best to both teach and model those traits. Thinking I could do more to address these goals, two years ago, at the urging of a colleague,<sup>3</sup> I tried to get to know my new students, typically sophomores just starting their Education coursework, a bit better by inviting them to meet with me, one-on-one.

This is the message I sent out to the whole class at the beginning of the semester:

Hello all-

As you can imagine, it's hard to get to know each person in a class of 30 that only meets briefly twice a week for one semester. So, since I think it's important to all teaching to get to know your students at least a little, I'd like you to write back and let me know when you have approximately 15 minutes in the next couple of weeks when you could stop by my office to talk. If you'd rather meet somewhere else, just let me know.

Thanks, and have a great weekend!

I was pleasantly surprised by how many students responded and how positive the response was. Of the 29 students in the class, 24 came to meet with me. In addition, in their anonymous initial course feedback, many cited this beginning-of-the-semester meeting as evidence of my caring. Further, in their end-of-semester formal evaluations they made some comments specific to the meetings including the following:

- 'Get to know you' meetings made the class more personal.
- [She] meets with students outside of class frequently, and really shows an interest in students' achievement.
- . . . In the beginning of the semester we had individual meetings with Dr. \_\_\_\_ to discuss why we wanted to be teachers, why we are at State U, what we are interested in, and anything else that we wanted to share with her. That showed us that she wanted to know us at a personal level and be more than [just] a professor that we saw twice a week.

My perceptions and the positive student feedback from that 'trial' class encouraged me to hold one-to-one meetings again the following semester. Once again, course feedback was positive and the class seemed to work better overall than previous versions of the same course. I attribute this in large part to the one-to-one meetings: I know students better and so can be more responsive; they seem to understand that I care about them and their course work and so are more responsive as well. We almost always find a point of connection during our conversations, and this helps us both see the other as someone we can know. Although it's hard to find time to meet with each student, the investment appears to pay great dividends and so I continue to schedule, hold, and reflect on these meetings.

### **Challenges to caring**

However, there are, in addition to time constraints, a number of challenges to being a caring professor. The biggest of these, for me, is student assessment. I work to support

and care for students, but also try to make sure the profession of education is the best it can be. What happens, then, is that although I take each student where s/he is and try to move him/her forward using various approaches, processes, and assignments, at times I have students who are not, in my opinion, ready to enter the field.

While I take hard work into consideration, give choices of assignments and lots of feedback, allow for revisions, work with students beforehand on assignments, and so forth, not all students get good grades in my classes. With my assessment, then, I try to indicate who I think is more or less ready to be a dedicated, well-prepared, and thoughtful educator. I've found it's especially challenging – sometimes impossible – to keep a caring relationship intact when one person has the power to assess (read: judge) another. Sometimes students who get a lower grade than they expected no longer want to be in relation with me; they no longer see me as one-caring or themselves as one cared-for. The converse of this situation may be that some colleagues would (and do) consider me to be 'too caring,' given, for example, my willingness to allow students to revise their work until we are both satisfied. Again, it's a challenge to balance assessment and caring (see also, Morley 1998).

Despite the challenges, I am fortunate in that where I now teach Education courses are capped at 30 students. This makes getting to know and respond to students reasonable (if not easy). Is it possible to care when teaching in large lecture halls? Some would say it's not, but I still recall a psychology professor I had as an undergraduate who managed to do so. She never did get to know each of her students' names, not surprisingly in a class of probably 200, but on the last day of class, she said goodbye to each of us with a handshake and a positive word. All of us who stood in line to say our farewells *knew* she cared about us and our academic success.<sup>4</sup>

Of course caring for students is demanding work that adds to the 'emotional labor' (e.g. Morley 1998) that academics, especially women and junior faculty, are already doing. Teaching at the college level (or at any level, for that matter) is physically, emotionally, intellectually, and sometimes even spiritually demanding (see, e.g. Breault 2009). And, in the 1990s, professors began to work longer hours as institutions came under criticism for the actual number of hours professors spent in classrooms. Increased institutional demands for publishing and expectations for 24/7 availability that come with technology have also been factors in the growing number of hours worked. A 50-hour work week is now the US average. Further, as Apple (1986) and others have noted, the 'intensification' of the professoriate suggests, in addition to more work, a separation between one's work and the meaning behind it. Organizational structures and institutional cultures, when intensified, thus promote a technical way of being for teachers.

Consistent with a technical orientation, a separation between the personal and the professional has been the norm. In the US there continues to be a climate in academe that encourages workers to 'disappear' their families. Progress is slowly being made, but most academics still cannot openly acknowledge and address the many demands of caregiving. In addition, there are a growing number of adjunct faculty in US colleges and universities. Using a cadre of usually underpaid, often overworked instructors benefits economically strapped institutions but makes life difficult for the adjuncts as well as for the dwindling number of full-time faculty who now have to advise more students, serve on more committees, and so forth.

Teachers also need to feel – and be – cared for. This can happen, in part, within well-nurtured teacher–student relationships. However, these relationships are most

often asymmetrical: the teacher is usually the one-caring and the student the one cared-for (Noddings 1992). Teachers might feel more cared for if institutions were more caring; if they were seen as more than interchangeable workers in the academy's market economy. Instructors whose selves are well developed are vital and available for student contact, two features that have been identified as important to students' academic success (Brems et al. 1994). But faculty vitality requires professional support and development (Kohut 1984) which in turn requires systemic change. Systemic change requires professors to engage in political action by fighting against budget cuts, growing class sizes, and other challenges to our ability to care – yet another demand on our time. Teacher unions are a possible support for such action, although they too have been impacted by the growing number of (usually non-unionized) adjuncts, a depressed economy, etc., and so have diminished power.

### Tentative conclusions

There are, of course, additional challenges to being a caring professor as well as an infinite number of ways to show we care. I provided examples of each, while contending that we can and must attend solicitously to caring in our work with college students in order to maximize student learning. I am suggesting that old saw, *They won't care to learn until they learn that you care*, is true. We must be there for our students if they are to be there for us. In fact, as Groth (2007) argues, 'what students still want most of all is *us*' (41).

This is not a new idea. Much has been written about the importance and impact of caring in education (e.g. Dewey 1938/1965; Martin 1992; Noddings 1992); about seeing our students as whole persons and not just contributors to the coffers or empty vessels to be filled with our accumulated wisdom (e.g. Freire 1970). But we still often struggle with how to care and how to show we care. Caring about others requires respecting them as separate, autonomous people worthy of our care (Thayer-Bacon, Arnold, and Stoots 1998). This is not always easy – or even possible – given the multiple, oftentimes overwhelming responsibilities that many of us in higher education have. It is sometimes a challenge to stay focused on students as people deserving of our best selves when competing demands drain our energies and deplete our limited resources.

Nevertheless, if we are to make a difference, we must make sure that students know we care about them. Practices that encourage acceptance, trust, inclusion, and openness are central to all caring relationships – and to a positive classroom climate. I have found one-to-one meetings with students, held early on in the semester and built on throughout the course, to be one way to show and model caring in the college classroom. Perhaps using this and other approaches premised on the importance of establishing and maintaining caring relations can move our students closer to Greene's ideal of articulate wide-awakeness, imaginative action, and the passionate pursuit of possibilities.

### Notes

1. That said, it may well be that in other disciplines, where, for example, the knowledge of specific information and skills takes precedence over human interactions, caring isn't as easy or as important.
2. See <http://ctl.byu.edu/>

3. I am indebted to my friend and colleague, Arlene Leach-Bizari, for encouraging me to add this piece to my teaching.
4. Ironically, despite (or because of?) her reputation for caring, this professor was fired due to her use of 'the F word' – during a class on human sexuality – which I would imagine most students in her class had more than a passing familiarity with.

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